WRITERS
unblocked

The best creative non-fiction, short stories, and poems
from ENGL 405, Creative Writing
Spring 2007

Writers' Unblocked is the first edition of a publication for creative writing students at Purdue Calumet. All the stories, poems and creative non-fiction in *Writers' Unblocked* were written by students in ENGL 405, Creative Writing, in Spring 2007. Students in ENGL 405 have helped choose the work that appears here, and students have helped name the journal.

We hope to publish more ENGL 405 journals in the future, and make these publications a regular feature of our classes.

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WRITERS

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creative nonfiction

Christine Hunter

Ballerina

I dutifully boarded the prop jet with my brother and my mother. The snow was gently falling and the airport runway glittered like diamonds. I could see tiny houses in the distance illuminated by brightly colored lights. The spirit of the joyous season seemed to be everywhere except in my heart. I sat in my seat and buckled myself in. I looked out the window shedding tears of what? Remorse? Happiness? I was off on another "adventure" as my mother liked to call it.

"Don't whine about moving again! Think of it as another adventure!"

I glanced at her in her seat behind my brother and me. She forced a wan smile. I didn't see the spirit of the holidays or the spirit of adventure in *her* eyes. But there were no tears. Sentimentality was frowned upon in our family. We had to buck up and take whatever was thrust upon us. This was our life—moving around all over the world. As I reflect back on that time of my life when I was a twelve-year-old, I am able to encapsulate the memories and recapture the emotions as if I were reliving the moments. It was a simpler time when a young presidential hopeful named John F. Kennedy had just been elected to office and the youth of America had reason for optimism.

I should be happy and I was, to a degree; we were going to reunite with my father after being apart for one full year. During this separation, we sent large tape recordings from New England to the Middle East and then back again. My mother tried to be brave but she cried a lot. Money was tight. We lived on a puny military allotment check. Mom had to work at a crummy office job that she hated. We lived in a small cracker-box house in a nondescript housing plan with streets named after Indian chiefs. The place was creatively named Indian Acres and our little piece of mass-produced Americana was situated on Hiawatha Avenue.

In spite of its generic quality my younger brother, Mark, and I loved it there. We were ten months and three weeks apart in age. We spent 5th and 6th grade at Ira Allen Elementary School and previous to living at Indian Acres we had been stationed at Ethan Allen Air Force Base. Tree-lined streets and playgrounds were

abundant and we practically lived on our 10-speed English racer bikes. The bikes afforded us a sense of complete freedom and exhilaration that we would never experience again. We biked away from the house at daylight and didn't return home until darkness fell and the street lights came on. We carried our marbles, a pen knife and a compass with us wherever we went on our "adventures". There was a dense forest behind our house with a deep gulley which we loved to bike or hike down to reach our carefully constructed shanty. We found scraps of discarded lumber and fashioned them into a crude lean-to which we proudly called our "fort". Mother would pack us a lunch of baloney sandwiches, cookies and fruit. We would take our beloved cocker spaniels, Laddie and Rusty, with us on our all-day treks to the fort. It was our secret clubhouse, our refuge where we conjured up multiple make-believe scenarios involving pirates, robbers, and cowboys. Each day was a new beginning, full of promise and excitement. We literally jumped out of bed and ran out the door to play—play all day. Eventually, though, we were forced to leave it all behind, again.

Wintertime in Vermont had held outdoor fun as well! We loved to don our ice skates—mine were white shoe skates that laced up past my ankle and featured pink pom poms at the top of the tie-and skate on the nearby ice rink. I dreamed that I was a star in the Ice Capades, just like my Aunt Sheila. I'd only met her once when my mysteriously shady and handsome Uncle Ed brought her by our house for a visit. My father was home then and his expression revealed his intense displeasure at seeing his brother-in-law again. "He always turns up again—just like a bad penny," my mother was fond of saying. More than once the men in black suits had come around inquiring as to his whereabouts. And my father cringed at the mention of his name each time he heard it. I, of course, was fascinated by the legend of my wayward Uncle! His life seemed so exciting—would he find us in Europe? Probably not. I didn't know it then but it would not be until my early adulthood that I would encounter Uncle Ed again.

The roar of the jet's engines transported me back to the present time. I settled back into my airplane seat and closed my eyes. The forceful thrust of the plane taking off always seemed to pin me back into my seat. Sputniks had been launched and the U.S. was entering into a space race with Russia. It was an exciting time; space travel was becoming a reality. I imagined that I

was an astronaut being propelled into the stratosphere, getting ready to explore the moon. I had on my space suit and Cape Canaveral was broadcasting orders to me through the earpiece in my helmet. Suddenly I felt a jab in my ear-it wasn't my earpiece, it was my exceedingly annoying brother, poking me with his pencil. "Hey, wake up! What's wrong with you this time? It's going to be Midnight soon and then it will be Christmas day. We can open our presents!"

"Don't be a birdbrain-we're on a plane, crossing the Atlantic—there is no Christmas for us this year. No tree. No gifts, either! Now leave me alone!"

He grimaced, stuck out his tongue and poked me again just because he didn't know what to say in reply and he was mad.

We'd been through these episodes before—many times. When Mark and I were in 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade in Taiwan, we lived in a *Better Homes and Gardens* designed house with a maid and a houseboy named Speedy. The house was mid-century modern; a low-slung sprawling contemporary ranch with an 8-foot high brick wall surrounding it and ornate iron bars covering each one of the windows. There was an American flag emblazoned crest on the entrance gate with the letters MAAG written on it. The MAAG insignia designated our family as American military personnel. My brother and I had a swing set, a dog, a cat, two rabbits and a turkey named Beautiful whose life we saved after my father won him in a shooting contest. We swam everyday, and flew to Taipei once a week in a small plane to grocery shop. We rode a troop carrier truck to school everyday (driven by our moms on occasion) where Chinese nuns taught us English and Math. My very best friend and I played dress up with my mother's dresses and jewelry in our front yard. My father was absent from the premises for 6 months, sailing around in a PT boat off the coast of mainland China exchanging potshots with the Communist Chinese. When he returned home I screamed. My brother cried. My father was sporting a full beard! Who was this bearded stranger?

We learned to eat with chopsticks. We savored the fruity coolness of pomegranates. We covertly slurped up ice cream that we had secretly purchased from the local Chinese vendor. The fact that our mother had forbidden us to do so made the treat taste even better. Time flew by *so quickly*. We thought it was great fun; we loved it; but inevitably, we had to leave that home, too. The

bittersweet pattern would repeat itself too often.

According to family legend (and we have many of them!) we had moved from my home town in Pennsylvania when I was six months old and my mother was pregnant with my brother. Until then, Mother had owned a flower shop and I would accompany her to work in a basket that she kept on the countertop. My grandmother, aunt and uncle owned the local funeral home. During my father's 30-day leaves from the service, our family returned there often to visit relatives and reacquaint ourselves with our home town. My childhood was punctuated with extended stays at my grandmother and uncle's Funeral Home. The house was a large white Georgian-style building built in the mid-1800s set on two acres of land. The foyer featured a mahogany staircase, cabbage rose wallpaper and elegant Italian chandeliers. The hand-carved spindles on the winding staircase frightened me because at the top of the landing one of them was missing, like a lost tooth. I imagined myself slipping through the opening and falling to the floor below. The antique photos of deceased relatives seemed to follow me with their eyes. The large room to the left of the foyer had two Italian green marble fireplaces with painted nature scene murals above them and sliding pocket doors made of walnut. The heavy burgundy velvet curtains added to the drama of the space. The funeral home was our *permanent* address. The hill behind the big white house was dotted with small Easter egg-colored tract homes which my brother and I called "Grandma's little houses." They weren't hers, of course, and the houses weren't that little, either! Her house seemed enormous in comparison. We loved it there, too. We rode the yard tractor, went to the Miracle Mile for Skyscraper ice cream Cones at Isaly's and rode in my aunt's red and white convertible to visit Kennywood. On Sundays, my grandmother and I got dressed up to go downtown to Stouffer's restaurant and eat Chicken a la King. But eventually, we always had to leave.

My mind flashed back to the stories I heard growing up about our eventful journey from Pittsburgh to Japan when I was six months old. The choppy seas, a minor typhoon and being eight months pregnant made for a treacherous journey across the Pacific for my mother. It was an "adventure" I guess. But we arrived at our destination safely. After my brother was born in Osaka and as I got older, I wandered around the neighborhood in my red and

gold kimono gown greeting people with "konichi wa". I carried a brownie camera around my neck which looked like a small brown square with brass-ringed glass circles on all sides. My brother and I developed our speech patterns using a combination of Japanese and English. We translated between our parents and the maids. We had just begun to learn to eat with chopsticks; a skill which Mark and I would later perfect during our time in Taiwan. On hot days, we sat nude in a large metal (or #2) tub filled with cool clear water and floated our yellow rubber duckies on the surface of our make-shift "pool". The walls in our home were made of rice paper and we had sliding screens instead of doors. We took off our shoes before entering the house and we sat on pillows on the floor in the living room to play. Our life there was fun-filled and carefree. My brother and I were blissfully unaware of the Korean war raging nearby. Our father had left to go there but we remained behind with mother and the maids in our Japanese home. Our formative years were fun but transient.

The plane lurched and the turbulence brought me back into the moment. Our family was on the move again. The same nagging concerns echoed in my mind. What will the new school be like? Will I make new friends? What will our new home be like? Will I ever have a normal life? Will I still recognize my father after being separated for a year? Did the dogs make it over to Germany safely? So many questions and just as many doubts! And what about Christmas? Here it is almost midnight, almost Christmas Day and there is no tree, no gifts, no Christmas spirit. A self-pitying tear escaped from my eye. I dozed a little bit. I dreamed of a hause—a **real** permanent address—with friends and relatives that I've had around me everyday, forever.

The word "adventure" left a bitter taste on my tongue. I didn't want adventure anymore. I wanted some consistency, some security. I was tired of living in the moment, not knowing what was around the next corner. I was sure that when I grew up I would have a well-ordered, stable existence. My brother was snoring softly, oblivious as usual to my inner turmoil. I was the drama queen and he was the pragmatist. I stared out the window at the inky night sky and the twinkling stars. I thought about my brother sitting next to me and my mother sitting behind us, watching over us. Then my angst began to subside and an unexpected feeling of joy and peace washed over me. I felt as if my Christmas spirit had

magically returned although I had no tangible explanation for it. At that very moment, my mother reached around our seats and handed my brother and I two gifts wrapped in bright red paper and tied in shimmering silver ribbon. "Merry Christmas" she whispered lovingly. My brother ripped his open quickly and gasped at the sight of his telescope. I slowly opened my gift, treasuring each step of the unveiling, not wanting to ruin the elegant paper and ribbon. I opened the gold-engraved box and there right in front of my very eyes was the most beautiful Dresden Ballerina figurine that I have ever seen! She was graceful and soft with delicate facial features, a starched net tutu and powder blue dancing slippers on her tiny feet. My heart leapt and I thanked my mother profusely. She nodded her head.

"You didn't think I would forget you two on Christmas, did you? We're family no matter where in the world we are!"

I think in that moment I truly understood what family is: it is a feeling, not a place. And I would carry that feeling with me forever. The plane landed and a black limo pulled up. My father stepped out of the back seat dressed impeccably (as always) in uniform and he ran to greet us. My parents cried and so did my brother and me! We all hugged and my father said, "Our family is together again." I clutched my ballerina and smiled. Christmas was really here!

poetry

Rachel Eggebrecht

Coffee And Clocktowers

When I'm sitting at that table nowadays
I'm sitting across from myself.
I'm peering through stale music
And a glass display of fake-looking desserts
And I can still see the blur of laughter and letterman jackets.
The numbers on the sleeves are different now
But I can still taste the coffee and bacon.

Angela clears her throat,
Breaking my thoughts into a puff of smoke.
She's staring down at me over the tops of her red wire frames
Pushed down onto the tip of her nose.
Her pen is tapping impatiently but "I need a minute," I say.
I've emptied four sugar packets into the cup before me
And I'm slowly tearing them into little pieces.
Blue, yellow, white, and pink confetti
And I remember when we talked about time
Like it wouldn't change a thing.

Grains of sugar lay sprinkled on the table and on the booth,
A new taupe-ish cloth but all I see
Is ripped red vinyl and Sarah's bright eyes.
I've been gone a long time but it's still all here.
I'm looking underneath the new paint,
Around the new walls to when driving was new
And I wasn't any older than my birthday implied.
I think maybe it's comforting.

Angela hasn't gone away.
She sighs deeply and mutters, "Take all the time you need."
I laugh a little, to myself, and think *time cannot be taken.*
The coffee I'm sipping is colder than Angela tonight.

Tara Dransoff

Playmates

I was five and he was fifty
Odd playmates you could say
I was wild-eyed and precocious
He was slow and grey.

But when mom had to work
Like she did on this day
She would take me over
To Papa's house to play.

"Can we please, please
Have a tea party?' I asked
"Ok! If you bring cookies too."
Papa said with a gasp

So we ate cookies
And drank milk from tiny tea cups
But Papa was watching the news
So he never saw me get up.

"Hey, where the heck did you go?"
He hollered, "This ain't much fun
You can't have a tea party
That is only for one!"

"I thought we were havin' a darn tea party,"
The grumpy old man said
"If you don't behave,
I'll put you to bed!"

I wanted attention and excitement
I was bored.
So I sent all my puzzles

Crashing to the floor!
Grasping for patience, Papa slowly said
"You will pick up every last one."
"Nuh Uh" I snapped
"That's not any fun."

"If I have to pick them up
I'll throw them in the fire!"
Papa thundered at me
But I knew he was a liar!

He stormed out of the room
Feverishly rubbing his head
And I gave serious thought
To what my Papa had said.

Grinning, I picked up the pieces
As fast as I could
I would listen to Papa
And do what I should.

When Papa checked in on me again
He was shocked to learn
I had listened to him
I had heard every word.

I cannot describe
The look on his face
When he saw me tossing my puzzle pieces
Into his fireplace!

Paul Whitten

The Waves of Memory

I was an eagle soaring through the sky, majestic and free.
But that was a side of me that appeared only in my dreams.
I spend too much time indoors, hiding.
The waves of memory, soft as silk, are growing thin and threadbare.
The memories of my past are growing dim and restless.
Some have fluttered away altogether.
I used to love the sounds and sights of early spring:
The budding trees, the trill of frogs, and the scent of fresh rain.
But now I stare up at the grass and trees and frogs with regret.
I should spend more time conversing with the trees.
The world isn't such a terrifying place.
I was a poet once, long ago.
I saw everything from an unrestricted point of view.
I was different, not just another drone.
I was loved by many, though celebrated by few.
And the trees still bud and the frogs still trill
And the rain still softens the earth.
Perhaps I am an eagle after all.

Traci Bryan

Lamest Excuse

The phone rings,
I can hardly wait,
Unaware that soon my heart will break.
I answer the line
—in a loving tone
Asking how the day has gone.

The unfamiliarity,
Something's amiss
Unknowingly I long to be near.
I wish away the distance
—offering my love
Sending him my heart.

His voice seems strained,
And in a distant tone
Unresponsive he speaks-
Words of goodbye
—a farewell to our love.

My world is spinning
I can barely breathe.
    Why? I cry.
Unable to believe.
It's not you, he states
—it's best for me,
Giving no more than I'm sorry...

The new job; the stress,
  Life is too hard..
Unspoken reasons
Issues that need to
—must be resolved.

Tears rolled down my cheeks,
I pray this will end
Unconsciously suffocating on
—Let go back to being friends.
Not listening to the justifications.

He offers no solace,
No peace from the pain
Only rationalized reasons
—the excuses are lame.
Unfortunately for me,
My tears continue to fall.
But I do care, I love you
—is lamest of all.

short fiction

Jeff Noy

Lucid

"Seriously, I didn't think it would kill him. Don't you watch cartoons?" I asked, twirling a pencil in my hands and looking at the lawyer. A blank confession paper was sitting on the table, too nice to mar.

Nudging the paper further away from me, I added, "Hitting someone a second time always cures them. It's practically fact. If anyone's to blame, it's the media."

The lawyer—who I might add was *annoyingly* skinny—shook his head at me and slid the paper back. He sighed out, "They don't show blood in cartoons for a reason. And you hit him twelve times."

"Yeah, well, have you ever owned an old TV or something? When it doesn't work, you hit it with your hand. Ape dynamics. Hit something until it works, right? I kind of thought it would be like that."

"I'm afraid not," said the lawyer, in his smug skinniness. He tapped the paper with a bony index finger and looked at me again, harder. Those beady sunken eyes just barely hanging on. Court-appointed attorneys are the worst. I didn't know if I was smelling his exasperation or the sweat of hundreds of other convicts who'd sat in this creaking chair. It was still warm when I sat down in it, from the last ass that made a mistake.

A little green ashtray was holding my precious cigarette. One of those cheap motel ashtrays of plastic, made in Taiwan. I wondered if the cops had stolen it from a Holiday Inn. It didn't match the rest of the room, that's for sure. The lovely shade of Taupe Grey. Not the flesh-peach Pale Taupe that my skin used to be. Not the all too familiar pink shade of Mauve Taupe that reminds me of her. This is the standard shade of taupe that shows absolutely no feelings when the room was painted. Emotionless like a confession room shouldn't be. Second-hand furniture with taupe flakes falling off of it from all those coerced confessions being scribbled or signed.

I lucked out. Someone else typed up my confession for me. My name was spelled wrong.

The Skeletal Lawyer took out a tape recorder. One of those

sleek hand-held ones that professional people use to hold really important thoughts, like how many gallons of milk to buy. It made a really nice click as he loaded a blank tape into it and set it standing up in the middle of the flaky table. Saluting me. Acknowledging that it was ready for me. My audience of one.

"Whenever you're ready," the lawyer said, nodding at my magnetic-tape audience.

"You want the whole story, then?" I asked, tapping my cigarette before putting it back into its home between my lips. It'd been too long.

I puffed my wonderful smoke in and out. My affirmation of life. Through the cigarette and the wall of smoke I muttered, "You got it. This is for posterity. For her. My confession of love, if nothing else."

I pushed down the cool metal of the record button, setting that magnetic tape spinning. My attentive audience, mechanical ears open, waited patiently for everything. "It was all for her..."

****

I wake up in a cold sweat each morning, no matter what I try. Pills are too expensive, and you usually need a doctor's signature for the good stuff. All my buddies from college dropped out of med school. I never even got in. Serves me right for enrolling just for nurses. Art school was way easier.

That cold sweat I get, it makes me chilled even in the summer. It's not just normal salt-water sweat. This is something beyond keeping the body temperature regulated. I'm chilled to my core. My carmine red sheets turn crimson in an icy, body-shaped pattern. You can't even tell someone was sleeping there-it's that cold. If it wasn't for scalding showers and even hotter coffee, I'd never get to work. That chill stays with me all 8 hours. Seven, if I can manage to get in late and out early. Know your boss's routine and the office's layout. Trust me, it's worth it.

First thing I do when I pull myself out of bed is hold my nose and try to breathe in. This is a reality check. If you can do it, you're still dreaming. When you're a lucid dreamer, things can get hazy. After that, it's time for a cigarette. That wonderful black tar and smoke in your lungs, warming you from the insides. I don't know why people have one *after* sex. They're practically foreplay.

Lucid dreaming is the ability to have conscious dreams. Think daydreaming, only way more intense. Some people try to do it, other people—like me—are stuck doing it. When each night is a potential nightmare, it's hard to get a decent night's sleep. It's a lot easier to just turn a dream into something you want, but that really takes a lot out of you. And when you work so hard each night to keep your dreams tolerable, the waking world is a lot more exhausting.

Other reality checks include looking at clocks or reading books, then going back over them. Things change in dreams, so it's a good test. Mirrors are usually blurry and distorted. Light switches rarely work right. This is really important to remember, if you find yourself questioning your reality. I do it every morning.

Twice on Mondays.

Work was a TPS kind of job. Papers, numbers, memos, that kind of thing. A career, sure, but not the kind you want to stay in. Art degrees lead to these kinds of places. It's not a big deal, though. I spent most of college painting nude models in abstract ways. Everyone wins in abstract art. I was the only guy on campus who bought full oil paint kits just for the flesh color.

It was remembering those paintings that started all of this, you know. My boss comes in one day, waving a new, crisp report that needed to be collated, or something. I didn't really hear him.

"Sorry?" I said, looking up from a flickery computer screen. Our computers were ecru-colored. That bland beige color that used to mean technological advancements, but has since become a symbol of obsoletism.

"I said this needs to be done by eleven. We have that new manager coming in from San Antonio for lunch, and I want it done before she arrives," said the Boss, in his infinite cubicle wisdom. He left, which prompted the elevation of my neighbor. He loves to peek over my wall. The dividers in our office were papaya whip, a shade of peach that just served to remind me of those paintings I did in college.

"You look like hell, buddy. Get a hobby, something to take your mind off work."

This from a guy with eye-bags that could carry the entire Gucci line. I just ignored him and finished the report, watching the big analog clock on the wall. A reality check. In the end, though,

he was right. Smoke breaks aren't a hobby, I suppose.

****

Model painting classes started up on the next Friday night after that. I don't really know why I signed up for the class. I had a degree in it, so I sure as hell didn't need any certifications. But a hobby's a hobby, and my paints had become caked and stale in years since my graduation. I had to buy another full kit. Those aren't cheap. The whole 6-month fee had to be paid up front, too. What a scam.

The teacher, some old woman in a yellow floral dress, would walk around behind us as we painted the models. I'd always arrive a little later than the others, so I could see the model beforehand. If it was a guy, I'd go home. I'm not paying for that.

Our beloved teacher, ever-patient and ever-encouraging, smelled a little like ammonia. Something clinical was on her breath at all times. She'd lean in to look at the paintings and breathe all over them as she instructed. Whatever was holding her teeth to her gums made my paintings fade. I wish we had more smoke breaks. Dealing with old people makes me crave my affirmation of life.

"Good, good," she'd say, regardless of whether it was or not. Always circling the class as we circled the model, who would pose on a round dais in the middle of the studio. It was usually draped in an ivory sheet, giving the best contrast against our vision of human perfection sprawled out on it. Anatomy was my favorite class.

You trace the form of your model on the canvas before you start. Outline her, make sure you have a good footing. Put the basic shapes up to begin the form. Circles and triangles and lines. These are what the body is made up of, broken down. Breaking down bodies has become something of a talent for me nowadays. After you get the basic shapes down, you put on the first layer of detail and shading. I like charcoal for this, but you can use whatever. Then comes the paint, which is when you've started committing to your work. You can't break this relationship anymore. You and the model are stuck with it, and that's a bond that can't be broken. There are rules in these classes.

Even the instructor isn't allowed to address the model.

The seventh session is when it happened. Our model was this stunning redhead. Not the light, rust color that you see all the time. This was a sharp auburn that contrasted the emerald flecks in

her eyes. The classic complementary theme, given a human shape. Her hair color was natural. Nude models can't hide much.

That class, I got a spot directly in front of her. I traced her lines and broke down her shapes. Mauve taupe, apricot, peach-yellow, with strawberry accents. I ran out of flesh tone paints. The whole time, she never took those emeralds off of me. I forgot about the crumpled pack of cigarettes pushing against my leg. Arching a little more for me, she created sharper light and shadow contrasts on her curves. A new reality check.

The teacher circled, the vulture of culture, stopping at my painting and pushing her glasses up to see things clearly. She left with a blush.

After class ended, our vision of beauty put on a terrycloth robe and left for the bathroom to change. I went out onto the marble steps in front of the studio for a smoke. It was still warm enough to not need a jacket. September is a good month for smokers. The building we painted in was one of those older New York apartments that had been gutted out on a level and converted into a studio apartment. I didn't know if the old lady was living in our classroom after we left, but I wouldn't have been surprised.

"You shouldn't smoke. Those things'll kill you," came this angelic voice from behind me. It was sweet and gentle, with this slight sing-song quality to it. This is how I expected Aphrodite to sound. She's how I expected her to look, anyway.

Dropping the butt and snuffing it out with the sole of my tennis shoe, I said, "I've heard that before. Doesn't make it any less fun."

"You say that when you're coughing up blood. I've seen what that stuff does to your lungs. It's so gross. Completely ruins it."

"So, are you a professional model?" I asked, hoping to avoid any more cancer-talk. Like I didn't get enough of that from TV, friends, and family.

"Not really. I just needed something to do on Friday nights that paid. I work for an organ donation clinic during the day. It's very rewarding," she said, smiling that lovely smile of hers. She was even saving lives as a career. Who could ask for a better catch?

"Listen, you want to get some coffee with me? It's still pretty early."

"Yeah, sure. Let me get my purse and I'll be right back.

I'm Beth, by the way," she said, sticking her small hand out at me. I shook it, wondering what kind of lotion can make a hand get that smooth.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Beth."

****

Let me just make this clear. I'm not good with women. Art school was different, thanks to the amount of drugs and alcohol swirling around the place. Rattle off some pseudointellectual comments about Monet, and that's all it took. You didn't even have to be attractive. I'm a big guy, and far from a looker. But in art school, you could grow a shaggy beard, bathe once a week, and girls would think you were deep. I miss those days. In a corporate setting, you just get pale and fatter. Coffee and smokes stain your teeth, and you get a hunched back from all the typing.

That said, when a beautiful woman like Beth comes along and gives you attention, you don't pass up the chance. She said she liked men with more meat on their bones. It was great. We hit it off really well. Coffee, then dinner, then movies, then overnight stays. Her lips were my new affirmation of life. It was two months of perfection, honest. I didn't think someone like me could get a girl like her.

I loved her apartment, too. It was twice as big as mine, easily. She had a huge library of books and movies. Classics like Soylent Green and Silence of the Lambs, none of that boring stuff like Titanic. She had great taste in everything. Her clothing was all carefully selected, too. Beth never looked too dressed up or too dressed down. Even her plain white nurse's uniform looked stunning on her. She was just that kind of woman, you know?

And her cooking was unbelievable. She made up all her own recipes. She absolutely refused to follow some other person's directions in the kitchen. She whipped up stuff I'd never heard of before, and fed me all kinds of specialties. I'm sure they were French or Italian or something like that. Far from the burgers I'd lived on up until then. This was candle-food. The kind you see in movies next to those fancy table settings with elaborate candles. I never knew if we were going to have seafood or chicken or what, but I didn't care. I'd come home and find some white Styrofoam coolers by the door, and she'd tell me we were having lobster or crab. She spared no expense in the kitchen. She was an culinary artist. I think I gained twenty pounds with her.

When I slept, I made myself be with her. I used to guide my dreams towards celebrities like Tyra Banks and Catherine Bell. They were boring now. Empty. In the mornings, I would wake up and do my reality check, then think of her. I didn't want to smoke anymore. She was my addiction. And I know that's not going to make things better, but I just hope it shows more about why I did what I did, alright?

Beth convinced me to become an organ donor. Something to help other people. Sure, they'd never want my lungs, but the rest of me is still pretty good. She helped me set it all up and told me all about her job. She was saving lives each day, giving people hope that they'll be able to continue on, with a second-hand body part. When I came over to her place after work, she was always smiling, satisfied. You'd never seen someone so content with their job. I couldn't get my head around it.

While all this was going on, I kept up my painting. She would model for me all the time, loving how I put her on canvas. All those shades of paint that made her up, it was second nature to paint her body. She was art. We moved in together and I'd never been happier.

And, of course, that's when things went to hell.

She came home one day looking miserable. I think it was the first time I'd seen her without a smile. It was rare enough for her to get home after I did. I usually found myself entering into a warm room full of delicious smells from whatever she'd been cooking up. Tonight, I'd just put in a pizza.

"Beth? You okay?" I asked, looking up from the window of the oven.

"Yeah, I'm okay. There's some problem at work, though. We may have a security issue or some kind of virus on our computers. Management told me that we were missing some of our items," she sighed, "Some organs."

I took my eyes off the bubbling pizza cheese and sat down at the kitchen counter, all shiny-clean brushed aluminum. "Someone's stealing organs? Are you serious?"

"It might just be some kind of huge misunderstanding, dear. We might have some filing issues that put one item in another item's place, that kind of thing," she said, pulling off her shoes and rubbing her feet. Heels were probably adding to the stress at work.

"I'm surprised you guys even caught the error. You said

those organs can sit in the freezer for years sometimes. You sure they weren't disposed of accidentally when you got rid of the stuff past its expiration date?"

"Sweetie, organs don't have sell-by dates. They simply become too degraded to use if they're not stored properly or they're not put in in time. We've only had a few organs like that."

The pizza timer dinged and I opened the oven, letting that wonderful smell of lightly-browned cheese and crust billow out into the room. I started slicing it up, saying, "Well, how are you going to take care of the problem?"

Beth took out the dishes and set the table. She grabbed some wine and poured a glass for each of us. Corking the bottle she said, "I don't know. I'm hoping we can just correct the problem ourselves without bringing in someone else. The last thing we need in the clinic is a huge investigation."

"Why? Don't you want the organs found and recovered?" I grunted out around a slice of pizza.

"Of course, but if it leaked out to the media, then we might lose donors and patients. Organ transplants are really, really touchy. Doctors will sometimes refuse to use organs from a clinic if there's any concern about the quality of the organ . Malpractice lawsuits can completely ruin someone's career," she said, smacking her lips after a sip of red wine, "Besides, if there's some big investigation, they'll probably take forever and hold up the clinic. We can't risk that, either. Understand?"

Something about the ways she said that seemed so definite. Like a command. I nodded and sipped my wine. Dinner went on quietly. Bed went the same way, unfortunately.

A week later, the investigation started. Beth was devastated. Her whole clinic got shut down by health investigators and the NYPD. You wouldn't believe how traumatic it can be to have everything invaded like that. The lead health inspector was the worst. Samuel Teak was this runty little pencil-neck who insisted on being the first into everything. He wouldn't even hold the door for Beth; he'd just march through before her. He rummaged around the place, making the whole situation worse for her. He brought up all these stupid little charges. Misdemeanor stuff, just to give himself something to do. He wasn't even interested in finding the missing organs or helping to organize their files. Instead, he fined her for having the toilet seat up in the men's room. "Health concern."

He was just that kind of weaselly person. Beth told me all this stuff over the course of the investigation. It went on for three weeks. The clinic couldn't bring in or ship out any organs to anyone. I'm sure a lot of people died because of the delay.

As you can see, Teak was murdering people. I wished I was still smoking at that point.

Beth kept saying that she wished he was gone. She wanted him to stop tearing apart the clinic and fining her to give himself something to do. She was worried about what this would do to her. I couldn't just sit there and let it happen, right?

Beth told me all about this Teak guy. He was practically a clockwork doll. In and out at the same times, a creature of pure habit. He'd get into the office at 9am, eating fast-food breakfast, and wouldn't leave until 10pm. Apparently this guy Teak didn't have a life outside of making people miserable. I decided to save Beth from him. She'd never do anything to hurt someone. She couldn't even muster up the courage to tell him off. So I did it.

I headed over there one night after Beth had gone to sleep. It was probably 9:30, and just like she said, he was still there. His grubby little hands going over paperwork. The desk he was sitting at was not his. He was going through Beth's things. Her personal appointment book was open on the desk, her handwriting all gentle curves.

I thought of her, of all her good deeds. She was here to make sure that a lot of sick people would get better. She was making a difference for those people, like she had for me. Beth was the person we all pretend to be whenever we drop change into a jar at a fast-food joint. She didn't do this for money or fame. It brought a smile to her face to work here, and that was enough. She looked so beautiful when was happy. Teak had stopped all that. People were dying because of him. It wasn't enough to just ask him to leave her alone. To leave the clinic alone. He would never agree to it. He had red pens in his breast pocket, no other color. He loved mistakes. He loved finding them and punishing the ones who'd made them. This would go on forever.

I couldn't let it. Beth's happiness was my happiness. I wanted to make him pay for what he took from me. I wanted to punish *him*.

Teak's ugly bald head, it shined from the desk lamp. Other than that, the office was almost pitch black. I could hear him mut-

tering to himself as he went over the files. I'm sure he was just trying to find new ways of holding things up. It made me even angrier that this guy was pretending to be working. I could've killed him right then, you know. Sneak around behind him and strangle him. But I wanted to hurt him, to make him suffer like Beth had.

It's this dark, and he can't see anything but his papers in the light. I just had to be quieter than his muttering as I approached. Before he even knew what was happening, I had jumped over the desk and grabbed his collar, hard. It was such a release to finally act like the guys in action movies. You don't really think about it, but punching people is good therapy. Teak's mouth got slick with blood as I kept punching him. At first he was able to beg me to stop, then it was just a lot of crying and groaning. My hand started hurting from all the abuse it was taking.

I grabbed the first thing I could find. It was this little paperweight in the shape of the medical sign. That rod with the snakes and wings, right? I just picked it up and started hitting him and hitting him until he stopped moving. I could hear the bones being fractured, and the avocado-green carpet was getting coated in his blood. There was a little squish with each hit, the sound of crushing a bug underfoot, until the paperweight just got stuck in there. In his shirt pocket was a package of cigarettes. An affirmation of life. I took them and pocketed them, then left in a daze, looking at the clock. 10:15. I looked again a moment later. 10:15, my reality check.

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"So there you go. The investigator won't bother Beth anymore, right? She can open back up the clinic and go back to saving lives," I said, looking at Skeletor the Lawyer. I puffed on my cigarette again, blowing the smoke at him. "If anything, I'm a hero. I did a good deed getting the clinic back up and running."

The lawyer leaned back in his chair, eying the tape recorder. Leaning forward, creaking his chair, he said, "I don't think any jury would see it that way. There's a lot more to the case than just your statement."

Behind him, through the reinforced glass and wire, I saw Beth in handcuffs. A few officers were carrying white Styrofoam coolers and passing them across a counter.

"What's going on? What is that stuff?" I asked, dropping my cigarette.

The bony lawyer turned and looked. "That," he said, "would be evidence. She was using those coolers to take the organs home."

I Kissed a Frog

Most little girls believe that deep down inside in their heart of hearts that one day Prince Charming will ride up on his horse, swoop them away and they will live happily ever after, maybe not ride up on a horse and swoop them away, but that they will meet their prince charming and live happily ever after. As a little girl I remember a fairy tale that involved a prince who was turned into an ugly frog by some kind of evil spell. In order for the spell to be broken, he would have to be kissed by a princess and then he would turn into a handsome prince, and they would live happily ever after. Well that sounds like the perfect ending to the perfect story. All stories don't have a happy ending. When little girls grow up, they become women who find it harder and harder to believe in such fairy tales. And most often in life there are very few princes' what you do get is frogs lots and lots of frogs. Here is my story.

At age 30 I felt as though I would never meet my prince and live happily ever after. I'm not trying to sound bitter, because I did meet some amazing guys and I did have a few relationships that lasted for a year or so, and poof, they would disappear and I would be back to being single again. I've given dating more than an ample opportunity to send me an attractive, single, loving man, who is honest, hardworking, and who doesn't cheat! That does sound like a prince, but I know that he's out there and some day, I'll find him. I've gone to so many weddings of friends and family members and standing there at the altar there was a princess and her prince, so I know that it's possible. What was missing from my relationships was that spark, that something special. Most guys that I'd been dating, didn't have it. They all seemed so, so plastic, not real something was missing. I went on blind dates, I even tried speed dating and nothing seemed to work. I considered myself to be wise to the ways of the world, especially the ways of men. I've been down the road of hurt before so I can usually smell a rat a mile away. But love is sneaky; it can attack and consume you often without your knowledge or permission. Love has this way of dulling the senses, clouding your judgment and weakening your response reflex. It will make a fool out of the average person, giving you reason to say and do things that you never thought you'd

be caught dead doing, much less saying.

Then poof, he appeared, I least expected it, there he was, my prince or least so I thought. I was invited to a gathering and he was introduced. For the sake of appearance he seemed to fit the order. After talking for what seemed to be hours, we exchanged phone numbers and I went home happy awaiting his first call. After talking on the phone for hours, we realized that we have so much in common, it was really exciting, we really clicked. We went to the movies, we went out to dinner. Everyday we would realize that there was so much more about each other that we liked, it seemed to good to be true.

I could not have ordered a more perfect man. And to make matters more complicated, my mother absolutely loved him. He could do no wrong in her eyes. She thought that he was such a gentleman. She would often comment that men of such caliber were few and far between, but she also warned that we were spending so much time together and that I should be careful. Of course I did not head her warnings; I was having too much fun! If we weren't together we were talking about when we would see each other next.

He was someone that I could talk so easily with. Some weekends we would just rent a movie and sit on the coach eating popcorn. He wasn't a remote hogger, he was polite and considerate of my feelings, and things were beginning to be almost perfect. I don't mean to imply that we never had disagreements because we did, but in the end we always found a way to resolve things. And I don't mean to imply that we spend every waking moment together either. He would hang out with his friends and I would do the same, everyone needs a little "me" time. Our little friendship blossomed into a growing relationship.

Which brings me to the case at hand? Days turned into months and months turn into years, three years to be exact. Then things started to change, not all at once, just subtle little changes that he would always explain away and I wouldn't give a second thought to. For instance there would be the occasional cell phone call that he would never get, or he wouldn't call because he was tired and went right to bed. And because we both worked odd shifts and I have experienced that type of fatigue myself, I wouldn't argue, I would just let it go at that. I would sit back and take inventory of out relationship in my head and it went something

like this. I have this wonderful monogamous relationship with an incredible, God fearing, educated, sexy man. He possessed all of the qualities that any woman would desire in a mate. Quite simply put, he was the prince charming that my story longed for. Whatever notion I had of any wrong doings, I quickly dismissed as coincidence and moved on. He made falling in love with him so easy and getting attached to him was even easier. At this point into the story I was hooked, this man could do no wrong in my eyes, or at least so I thought.

On his birthday, I decided to get up early, and surprise him with breakfast. I wanted this to be extra special, so I had to make everything from scratch. The hash browns were cooked to a golden brown. The aroma of something good cooking floated around kitchen all morning. I was very careful to pay attention to all of the little details that make a meal special. I sprinkled cheese every so lightly on top of eggs that were scrambled to perfection. I buttered biscuits that were not homemade but were close enough to fool anyone's mother. I stared at my meal and I almost had to pat myself on the back. So the only thing left to do was to hop into my car, and head toward his house. On the way I stopped off at the party store and grab a bouquet of birthday balloons. This truly was a labor of love, and I'm feeling quite proud of myself. As I'm driving, I'm all smiles and I think to myself, how surprised he will be when I get there. Then I realize, I should give the birthday boy a quick call just to make sure that he's home. The phone rings and he picks up on the third ring, a sign that he was probably sleeping. I wish him Happy Birthday, and continue with small talk. I'm careful not to talk too long, as it might make him suspicious. I say my goodbyes, hang up and drive the remaining ten minutes or so that it takes to get to his house. I pull up in the driveway and call the house so that he can come open the door, I will have my hands full with the food and all of the trimmings. The phone rings three, four, five times. Finally he picks up. I'm closing the car door and struggling with the food and the balloons so I'm really not focusing on his hesitation to pick up the phone. I tell him to come open the door. There's a bit of surprise in his voice as he utters my name, and inquires of my whereabouts. I repeat myself for the second time and tell him to stop playing and come open the door.

He utters my name a second time coupled with "what are you

doing here?"

Stop playing, "I'm at the front door."

My women's intuition is beginning to kick in and I'm a little concerned but not really grasping the whole concept that something is defiantly wrong here. I'm standing at the door with this breakfast in one hand, balloons in the other and thinking that it's taking him way too long to make it to this door. I'm trying to block all negative thoughts out of my mind but a knot is beginning to form in the pit of my stomach. Finally he appears after what seems like hours, but was actually several minutes. He is wearing pajama bottoms no shirt and he is standing there looking so sexy. I'm temporarily distracted and almost forget that he had we waiting for much longer than I cared to. As he opens the door I notice that he is not his usual all smiles and eager to greet me with open arms self. My heart is starting to beat a little faster now, my throat begins to get dry and my hands are beginning to get sweaty. Then he asks, "Why didn't you call first?" This behavior is definitely out of the norm and all sorts of emotions begin to take over. Panic followed by fear and anger; settle in my throat making it difficult to form words, so I just stand there amazed. As I'm still standing there, it dawns on me that I have not been invited in. I take the initiative and step up to enter the house but he gently pushes me back and says, "You should have called me first."

"Call first; I've never called you before coming over. Then I pause for a moment. Then I ask the question, that I don't really want to know the answer to, but I allow to stumble out of my mouth anyway. "What's the matter, do you have company or something?" His response cuts through my heart like a knife, "as a matter of fact I do."

What, I can't believe what I'm hearing, but I am a glutton for punishment so dumb founded I ask another stupid question.

"Are you seeing someone else?"

"As a matter of fact, I am"

"And you were going to tell me, when?"

"I meant to, but there never seemed to be a right time and I didn't want to hurt you.'

He's standing there trying to explain to me but all I hear are excuses. I'm trying to focus on what he's saying, but it's difficult. I thought that we had so much in common, we spent so much time togherher, when did all of this happen? What happened to my

prince? I want to say something that doesn't give away my emotional state, but jealously, hurt and betrayal overwhelm me and tears are beginning to form in my eyes and there's a knot in my throat . Then something happens that surely gets my attention, A muffled female voice cuts through the silence and I'm overwhelmed. He closes the door partially, so that their conversation is unheard by my ears. Anger has been building up inside of me and the only though I have is to hall off and try to knock his damn head off! But I don't, instead, like a fool I just stand there and wait. I wait patiently for more hurt and humiliation. His attention is now focused on my again as he opens the door to try and reason with me. "Look, I'm really sorry, but there's not much more for me to say"

"Sorry, is that all that you can say to me, is that you're sorry?"

"What else do you want me to say, I'm trying to be reasonable and give you an opportunity to get whatever, off your chest before you leave"

"Leave, now you want me to leave"

What else did you think would happen?"

An apology is not going to smoother over the hurt. Before I realize it a few tears are beginning to fall down the front of my face. Moments later, I'm in full water works, runny nose and all. He very politely thanks me for my gift and gently closes the door, not giving any further opportunity for conversation. At this point I decide that desperate times call for desperate measures. I begin to beat on his door and ring his bell uncontrollably. I can not allow my prince to just toss me so quickly aside, like some worn old shoe that has no further use. How dare he, try to quietly and quickly discard me and then walk away. When I see that my behavior yields no response, I grab my cell phone out of my pocket and begin the first of several unanswered phone calls. When he does not respond to this, I begin to yell and scream at the top of my voice, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned and if he does open up this door..." I can't believe that I have been reduced to such childish behavior. At work, I am the single woman's advocate, the one who so skillfully gives advice to other singles when they realize that they have kissed a frog and it didn't yield a prince. Eloquently speaking words of wisdom, "It's best not to cause a scene, that never accomplishes anything, just go away quietly, never let him see you sweat" Yeah, right, that shit only works in the movies but what do you do when love has thrown you a curve ball and sent in

a pinch hitter?, a spare princess.

Slowly I pick my heart up off the ground and begin to walk back to my car. I refuse to cry any longer, besides it has only given me a headache and swollen eyes. Besides I have had enough excitement to last a lifetime. On the long drive home when I am in the company of my thoughts, I reassure myself that everything will be ok and that I will bounce back. I've realize that you can't tell your heart who to love and men don't come equipped with warning signs; DANGER, proceed with caution.

This is where my story takes a sharp turn. I thought that I'd found my prince, but he turned out to be nothing but a stupid old frog! When I kissed him he never turned into a prince. He just hopped along to another unsuspecting princess.

Over the next few months I had time to mediate and really take a good look at myself. This experience has taught me a very valuable lesson, one that will make me wiser than I have ever imagined. Love is not based on some set of rules, or any list of requirements that one can impose on another. It's not about finding yourself in another, or compromising self either, it's about looking deep within and allowing that inner you to flow quietly over everything that you see or touch. Quiet simply put, it's what makes you, so perfectly and wonderfully you! Thanks to the frog, I discovered the real me. I don't need a prince charming to complete me, I am complete without him!

The moral to this story: The next time you meet what you think is a prince, be careful, make sure that what you don't have is really a frog.

Kevin Thomas

Kickball!!!

It's winter, my favorite time of year. Christmas is coming, and with that Christmas Break. Sledding, snowball fights, and football in the snow are definitely the favorite activities of the neighborhood kids. Even school is fun before Christmas break. You make wreaths, color stuff, and this year Mrs. Blythe said each student will have a secret Santa. All of this stuff is great, but the best thing about school in the winter, is the outdoor recess. And the best part about the outdoor recess in the winter is the annual game of Kickball. This isn't normal kickball either, this was extreme kickball. This was the sixth graders vs. the dorky fifth graders, which was played every year, just one time. The blacktop will be the playing field. The stupid fifth graders will stand on the left side, and the sixth graders will stand on the right. Last year, we were the puny fifth graders, but this year we have become the sixth graders.

Today is the day. I eat my breakfast while my mom urges me to get away from the T.V. set. My mom goes through the daily routine, "Andrew honey, get ready. Enough cartoons." Then I usually complain, or if the cartoons are really good that day, I try saying I'm sick and I hope that my mom lets me stay home. But today is an exception to the daily routine. I'm excited to go to school. Kickball day is a big deal. I get ready faster then ever before. Dressing for the occasion, I wear comfortable pants and my best running shoes. I sprint out to the car, and my mom starts driving slow as ever. If my dad was driving, we would probably be there already. My mom drops me off, and I sprint to the doors of the school. I'm pumped. I hang up my coat on the coat hanger along with my backpack, and I sit down.

Mrs. Blythe begins class, "Everyone get seated , and take out your crayons."

"Psst....Psst....., Steve did you know it's kickball day?" I whisper.

"Yeah, I know, so be quiet or you won't be able to play," he says.

"Oh, I'm playing. We're gonna rock the stupid fifth graders." I say with a smile. "Andrew, take out your crayons now and quit talking!" Mrs. Blythe yells at me. I hate

Mrs. Blythe. She's so mean to me. Steve always talks too, and she never yells at him like that. Other students don't have their crayons out, and she asks them if they can take them out. She doesn't yell at them and make them feel like crap. It's because she knows my older sister who's two years older then me. My older sister was a trouble maker. So she probably pinned that reputation on me, because she's been treating me without mercy all year. Instantly, if I do anything at all, I get yelled at. Others get warned, or asked nicely to stop. But not me, I get yelled at. Thanks sis...

"Heh heh heh," Steve snickers after I get yelled at.

"Yeah real funny, just shut up," I say back.

"She yells at you a lot," Steve says, still snickering and trying to hold in laughter.

"Yeah whatever, I don't care, I'm just gonna be quiet so I can play kickball today," I respond.

We have just finished coloring our Winter Season pictures, and Mrs. Blythe makes us take out our Spelling books. Steve leans over towards me.

"I hate spelling, I just want to go to recess," Steve whispers.

"I know, me too, but if you don't shut..."

"Both of you quiet down please, especially you Andrew. How many times do I have to warn you before you get it through your head? You can't keep talking," Mrs. Blythe says harshly.

"But all I said was...," and she cut me off again.

"No buts, and if you say another word, you'll have to stand on the line during kickball today," Mrs. Blythe says. This was it, I wasn't saying another word again for the rest of the day. The line was dreaded among sixth graders. You have to stand on the edge of the black top and watch everyone else play. It's the worst punishment ever. I've had to hear about the fifth graders and sixth graders annual kickball game since I was in first grade. I got to play in it last year as a fifth grader and get beat, and now it's my turn to play as a sixth grader and win. I'm not letting this slip away because of stupid Steve. He is my best friend, but I'm not gonna have it. Now Steve is beginning to laugh again, but this time I'm not gonna say anything. I'm just gonna let it go.

"Hey raggedy Andy, don't cry," Steve says trying not to laugh. I can't say anything, I just have to sit here. Mrs. Blythe will pay attention to our behavior, and I don't want to have to stand

on the line.

"What's wrong raggedy Andy, you too sad to talk, haha," Steve says pestering me even more. I hate being called raggedy Andy. It makes me so mad. I'm starting to lose it.

"Hey raggedy Andy, where's your girlfriend raggedy Anne?" And that did it. I lost it.

"Shut up Steve, you're retarded," I snap back angrily, but trying to stay as quiet as possible.

"Awww, are you upset chump?" Steve says giggling.

"Your gonna be upset when I punch you in the mouth you stupid retard," I say, trying not to laugh myself.

"Your gonna be upset after I hang out with your mom..." Steve tried saying, but it's too late. I'm caught acting stupid again. This could be it.

"That's it, you're both on the line for recess," and that was that, Mrs. Blythe did it. I knew it was coming. I'd almost say I deserve it this time, because I knew if I just sat there quietly it would've been fine. But stupid Steve calling me Raggedy Andy was too much. I can't just sit there. I should've told on him. What kind of friend does that though? This is horrible.

I almost begin to cry, but the embarrassment would be too much. I wouldn't survive the insults. I can't believe I was so excited and now it's ruined. This is the worst thing ever. Maybe she'll forget. Maybe if we just go running out there she'll never notice and we'll get through the recess before she calls us out.

Class time until recess feels like it's taking forever. We went through Spelling and Math, and now we're beginning Social Studies. So close and yet so far I think to myself. Only 10 more minutes. I look over at Steve and he seems mad.

"This is so stupid," Steve said.

"It's your fault dumby," I whispered back.

"Yeah right, if you weren't such a baby...," he snapped.

"Whatever," I didn't want to say anymore. It was bad enough as it was. And in order for Mrs. Blythe to forget about our punishment, we can't draw anymore attention to ourselves. Then all the sudden, I hear Mrs. Blythe begin to speak.

"Put your books away, we're going out for recess. Grab your coats and line up at the door," Mrs. Blythe says to the class. The class walks outside, and the cold hits us like a smack in the face. It's cloudy and kind of dark for being the middle of the day,

but at least it's no longer snowing. The snowstorm ended a few days ago, and if the weather was any worse, we wouldn't be able to have outdoor recess today. There is about 6 inches of snow all around the blacktop, which was perfectly cleared off by Henry the Janitor. All of the students, fifth and sixth graders, run outside down the paved walkway leading to the blacktop. Everyone is so excited. All of us sixth graders run to the right side of the blacktop, while all of the fifth graders run to the left. All of us getting ready for the annual kickball game. Then Mrs. Blythe calls out my name along with Steve's.

"You two, get over here. You can stand along the side of the blacktop and watch everyone play since you had so much fun in class today." We are the only ones who can't play. The fifth graders don't even have anyone in trouble. It would be a little better if some other people were in trouble too, but their were none. Me and Steve were the only ones. This is horrible. This could be the longest 20 minutes I may ever experience.

"God, she must hate me, not only is she making us stand on the line for recess, she's got to make us watch the game too," I try to tell Steve who is spaced about 10 feet away from me. He hears me, which is good.

"Yeah, I hate Mrs. Blythe," He says angrily. Now Mr. Boylan, the fifth grade teacher, is beginning to explain the rules.

"First of all, Sixth graders on the right, Fifth graders on the left, and you must stay behind the middle line that separates the black top. Stay on your side! Secondly, I'll throw a few balls to the fifth graders, and a few to the sixth graders, and you will try to kick them over the other teams back line. Basically kick it off of the black top. It's very simple people! Finally, HAVE FUN!!!" and he threw the balls over to each team. It was havoc. There were kickballs flying everywhere. The balls were being volleyed back and forth as if the fifth and sixth graders were at war, and the kickballs were the bombs. This is so frustrating! And the worst part is, the fifth graders are winning! How can the fifth graders be beating us? The sixth graders have never lost. They always win. We can't lose to them.

"I can't take this anymore, I hate Mrs. Blythe so much." I tell Steve.

"I know dude, she's the worst teacher in the world," Steve says, as a kickball rolls to a stop right between me and Steve. I

look at it, then I look at Steve with a certain look in my eye. The look that asks "Should I do it?" He knew exactly what the look meant.

"Hurry up, kick it dude, it's your chance. Mrs. Blythe isn't looking," Steve urges me on. She isn't looking at all. She's too busy talking to Mr. Boylan, and keeping score. They aren't very far away from us, but far enough that we could talk without being caught.

"Should I do it?" I ask Steve nervously.

"Yeah, who cares, you won't get caught. She's not even looking! Don't be such a wuss..." Steve pressure me on.

I turn and see the fifth graders goal and I'm ready. In the same direction of the fifth graders goal however, stands Mr. Boylan and Mrs. Blythe. They intersect the path from the ball to the fifth graders goal perfectly. They'll definitely know I kicked the ball after it flies over their head. They will recognize where the ball came from, and they will definitely bust me. "Oh well," and I head towards the ball getting ready to kick it as hard as I can towards the fifth graders goal. I take my steps, and BAM! The ball is blistering ahead through the frigid cold. I hear Steve beginning to laugh. Then, almost as if time is in slow motion, I recognize the path the ball is taking. Now I know why Steve is laughing already. It is heading right for the back of Mrs. Blythe's head. And to make it worse, now it is heading for her face, because she is turning to look at what Steve was laughing at. Uh oh.... BAM! The ball smacks Mrs. Blythe right in the side of the face. She goes down as if being hit my a punch from Iron Mike Tyson.

"Hahahahahaha," Steve laughs hysterically. The entire game of kickball has just stopped, and everyone is staring me down. The blacktop is in a state of absolute silence, something like a wintery ghost town.

"Mrs. Blythe is really gonna hate you now dude, hahaha," Steve laughs at me again. I run over to Mrs. Blythe as fast as I can to check if she's okay. She sits up as I grab her arm to help her. I look and she has the lines from the ball imprinted in her cheek.

"What in God's name do you think you are doing?! You little...." who knows what she was going to say before she stopped herself. She stands up and drags me into the school by my arm.

"I'm calling your parents!" she says, as she drags me down the hallway towards the office. At first I was scared, I realized my

parents were going to kill me, but honestly this is great. It is worth the trouble. I almost didn't get to play kickball, because she wants to hold a grudge against my sister and take it out on me all year! Well I got to play kickball, and take out my frustration on Mrs. Blythe. Seeing the lines imprinted in her face was worth all the trouble in the world. Today was better then I ever expected it to be.

David Boban

Landed

It was time to try again. Shaun was more determined this time than the others, or at least that's what he told himself. He took a deep breath, looked himself right in the eye through the reflection of the completely glass window, and silently spoke the words "Hi Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, I'm your new son in law." He critiqued himself harshly. Shaun took a good look at himself. He saw an average 20 year old brown haired, blue eyed young man who was way in over his head. At that moment, nothing seemed to be working out well. His hair wasn't right. His shirt didn't sit right. He should have done a better job shaving that morning. He tried to look grown up, but only managed to look 20 years old.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon - not quite rush hour yet at the Mayfield airport. There were people around, but not so many that they would distract him from his predicament. Shaun was sitting alone at a Quizno's with an untouched sandwich. He sat next to a window watching both himself stare back through his reflection and the people walking hurriedly by. The lights seemed bright in the main part of the airport, but none of the light seemed to illuminate the restaurant. "I wonder why that is. Maybe it's just me, aren't I the melodramatic one...." Shaun joked to himself inside his own head. He thought about how hungry he was, and how he wished he could eat. Shaun just couldn't bring himself to. His stomach was uneasy enough as it was.

By five o'clock the airport started getting louder. Within minutes people started flowing from every corner. The Quizno's Shaun had concealed himself in was no longer a restful hiding place. He took a deep breath, threw out enough food to warrant a thirty minute lecture from his mother, and begrudgingly made his was back to baggage claim. He almost got lost on is way. He spent more time daydreaming than paying attention to the signs leading him back to his new bride.

Gloria was sitting on the enormous unpolished silver machine that spit out people's baggage. She was reading Ender's Game and probably wouldn't have noticed if Shaun had run past her with his hair on fire. He sat next to her and waited for her to speak first. She didn't. Gloria turned a page. She turned another. As Shaun waited for her to speak he thought about where this had

all began.

It was spring break. Spring break '07. And was new chapter in Shaun's life as far as he had been concerned. He had just turned twenty, had a new girlfriend, had reservations in Palm Beach and no responsibilities to his parents for the first time in his life. He and Gloria had only met about a month earlier through mutual friends and hit it off tremendously in their very young opinions. They had simply planned to go down to Palm Beach for the normal college partying antics. However, what they ended up with was a lot of missing time and their marriage papers. Shaun recalled the conversation, or what seemed like a conversation about their shared blissful feelings of happiness with each other, but he couldn't believe where it had gotten them. It had landed them at a courthouse blindly signing papers. They had both had a deep need to prove to each other the seriousness of their feelings. But, with legal documents securely in their hands, by the end of the day there was no doubt that the two were recognized as husband and wife.

Back in reality, the reality was hitting Shaun harder and harder. What was this girl's middle name again? Wasn't she allergic to something pretty common? Didn't she say she wanted to move somewhere weird after we finished college? All Shaun really knew was the essential stuff: she was pretty, she laughed at his jokes, she was capable of having a conversation, they shared the same basic instincts, and her parents were landing in fifteen minutes. All these thoughts made him sweat and panic more. He got up from Gloria's side and started pacing.

"Oh sit down, it'll be fine." She said with her head still planted in Heinlein's work.

"How can you be so calm?"

"Because panicking won't fix anything. They are going to get here, you're going to tell them, and we'll deal with it from there."

Great, Shaun thought. Yeah, I'll tell them. He imagined the meeting again. "Hi Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, you don't know me but I married your daughter. Any questions?"

Shaun tried to do as Gloria said. He liked to think of himself as the calm one in the relationship but this moment was

way too much to handle. His mind wandered again through the history of their short relationship. He had only one small semi-encounter with Gloria's parents.

The semi-encounter took place about a week before leaving for spring break. It was a Saturday night. Shaun and Gloria had been out at a party and were driving back to their college together. The party was not as big or elaborate as their friends had made it out to be. It was only about 11 o'clock in the evening and they were already heading back to their respective dorm rooms. It was a peaceful spring night, and the two were making idle conversation as Shaun drove back to the school. They did not get very far in their chat before Gloria's cell phone interrupted them. It was Gloria's mother. She had a question that apparently could not wait until morning to ask. The mother and daughter discussed what they needed to discuss, and then started discussing what they probably did not need to discuss. "Mothers....", Shaun thought as he listened to the same barrage of questions asked of Gloria that every mother asks. Eventually, inevitably, the questions began focusing on Gloria's relationships. "Yes mom, I've kind of started dating someone," Shaun's ears perked up. Gloria rolled her eyes a few times, smiled at Shaun, and seemed to get a little uneasy. She squirmed in her seat and there were even hints of blushing. "His name is Shaun" she said, "and "and he's a very nice boy,". So far so good, Shaun thought to himself. Gloria got quiet for a little bit. Shaun was trying desperately to hear Gloria's mother's voice, but the best he could do was make out her tone of voice. She sounded like a mother lecturing her daughter on the usual things. Safety, sobriety, sex, ect. Gloria finally spoke. "No mother, we're not moving too fast. We just met,". Shaun continued to try to make out more of what Gloria's mother had said, but it was no use. The quiet sound of air rushing past the car was enough to drown out Gloria's cell phone. After a few more minutes Gloria said goodnight to her mother.

"That was your mother?" Shaun asked.

"Yep, she's just being a mom," Gloria joked.

"Everything alright?"

"Oh yeah, she just wanted to know where I left some of her sewing supplies. I used to borrow them all the time and I guess I never put them back," she said.

"Oh, alright. I didn't know you sewed." Shaun said with a

smile.

The two sat quietly for a moment. Shaun was intensely curious about the details of Gloria's mother's questions. He could draw a few conclusions from what Gloria had said, but he wanted to know more.

"So she wanted to know about me," Shaun finally built up the nerve to say.

"Yeah, she's just worried I'll come back home pregnant or with a bunch of crazy tattoos or something. My parents can be pretty old fashioned when it comes to that stuff."

"Ahh, well, you should tell them there's nothing to worry about with me. I'm not pushing you to get any tattoos yet," Shaun said trying to joke. Gloria just smiled. They continued home.

Shaun hadn't thought much about the conversation at the time. There was no reason to. After all, they hadn't been moving "too fast" at that point. At that time, the two had only kissed once. There was no need for concern on Gloria's mother's part. However, back in the airport, back in the present, the conversation took on a whole new meaning. If Gloria's mother was asking about moving too fast at that point, how would she react to this news? According to Gloria herself her parents were "old fashioned". Were they old fashioned as in the kind of people who wear flannel shirts and slacks that barely make it to their ankles? Or were they the kind of people that are firmly rooted in traditional family values and customs? Shaun thought back to his church going days. He remembered what the Pentecostal Christians view of marriage was. No sex before marriage was the big one, of course. No one ever dared elope in the church. Weddings were only one step behind Christmas or Easter as far as the church was concerned. Did her parents think this way?

With a deep breath, Shaun tried to calm himself. Maybe Gloria was right, he thought. There was no use in getting worked up. What's done is done. And, after all, they were adults according to the American Judicial System and therefore capable of making these decisions on there own. They were no longer under the supervision of their parents and could do whatever the hell they wanted. Yeah. He played the meeting scenario a few more times in his head. Shaun sighed. He returned to Gloria's side.

As the two sat there together, Gloria with her book and Shaun with his thoughts, Shaun began to notice people walking by.

He watched people navigate swiftly through crowds expertly. He watched men in expensive suits holding their heads up high and speaking loudly on cell phones as if trying to proclaim their importance. He noticed older people who no matter which direction they were headed always had an expression that they were lost. As he sat there something finally stuck out to him. It was a young couple, a few years older than Shaun and Gloria who stood up rigidly as two adults approached them. He could not hear a word of what they were saying. He could only read body language and facial expressions. From what Shaun could make out, it was the young man who was introducing his love interest. There were some visible signs of awkwardness. The young woman seemed to shy away and smile nervously as she was introduced. The young man very smoothly guided her as he introduced her to what appeared to be his parents. Then, as the mother reached out to shake the young girl's hand, the woman's glasses fell out of her other hand. She seemed flustered all of the sudden, more flustered than the young couple. It was a clear sign of nervousness. The mother collected her glasses from the ground and stood up smiling and red. The group seemed to laugh off the incident as they concluded their introductions. The group gathered their luggage and disappeared into the crowd. The whole scene played out in less than one minute, and was somewhat comforting to Shaun. It never occurred to Shaun that Gloria's parents could be the nervous ones. He wasn't sure if this made a difference to their situation in any way, but he did know one thing: misery loves company and the thought of not being the only uneasy one in this encounter made things a little easier.

Shaun sank into his chair and covered his face with his hands. Gloria's parents would be arriving any minute. He looked over at Gloria and tried to imagine what things were going to be like on that day, the next day, the next week, the next year, ect. There were still plenty to learn about his new wife.

"What's your middle name?" Shaun mumbled.

"Ha, you don't know my middle name?" she giggled.

"No, I thought it'd be a nice thing to know these kinds of things being that we're spending the rest of our lives together."

"Mom!"

"You're middle name's mom?" Shaun said confused for only an instant as Gloria ran to jump into her mother's arms.

Moving On

Their home sat on a street reminiscent of the old "Leave It To Beaver" days. It was of considerable size with a large wrap around porch that Nick and Lori had worked hard to renovate for the entire first summer that they lived in the home. In fact, when they had moved in, the house was in disarray. It was a home that was previously owned by a 92 year old woman who had been widowed 23 years earlier. When she passed her son had flown back to Connecticut from Las Vegas and sold the house as is and since Nick and Lori bought it 8 years ago they had been fanatically working to restore it. Even their young children, Logan, 6, Hannah, 5, and even little Ethan, who was only 3, had helped in their own way and the house had become the pride and joy of the whole family.

But that was all different now. Where a great deal of happiness once was, there was now sadness. In late April, on a Tuesday, Ethan had gotten the flu, or at least what Nick and Lori had suspected at first. They had kept him home and not let him go to preschool, thinking that if they did all the of the things that people do for their children when they are not feeling well: Lori had made sure to make him her homemade chicken soup with the macaroni noodles like he liked and Nick had stopped after work and gotten him a new coloring book so he could be entertained. They did everything that they could think of but the small boy's condition only worsened and by Wednesday they took him to their family doctor, Dr. Ellis.

Dr. Ellis examined Ethan while he sat on Lori's lap listlessly. While Dr. Ellis had greeted the pair cheerfully, as he went to work his face grew somber.

Finally the doctor spoke. "Lori, I want you to go to the hospital for a couple of tests. It's probably nothing but I'd just like to make sure. I'll have the nurse call Dr. Clemmons. He's the best pediatrician I know. He'll take care of you."

"Why? What do you think he has?" Lori had asked with a worried look.

"Like I said, it's probably nothing but I just want to make sure it's not anything more than your basic flu," he answered.

Lori looked from Dr. Ellis to Ethan. She knew he was right and that she needed to do what he had instructed. Ethan didn't

look good and wasn't himself. Normally, at 10:30 in the morning, Ethan would be running around and getting himself into trouble, but now he was sitting wearily with his head resting against her collar bone and slightly sweating but trembling from his 103 degree fever.

After the pair left Dr. Ellis' they had gone straight to the hospital across the street. Ethan was tested and Lori waited for the results while sitting on a hospital bed with him, consoling him as best as she could. When the doctor did return he informed her of the grim news: Ethan had contracted spinal meningitis and had to be admitted. Three days later, on a rainy Saturday afternoon while Father McMahon was administering last rights, Ethan died in Lori's arms. She refused to let him go for nearly an hour. Nick had to almost force Lori to allow the nurses to do their job.

The days after went as expected and the wake and funeral were held. During this time Lori stopped eating and pretty much everything else, including taking care of her other children. She preferred to stay in bed crying and not speaking. At the funeral, she threw herself upon Ethan's casket sobbing. Nick and her mother had to coax her from where her son lay.

A month later, not much had changed. While Lori managed to get up with her family she still meandered through the house. Her house that she had loved so much and took painstaking care of had become a place full of memories of Ethan. Each morning after Nick left for work and the kids had walked to school, Lori went into Ethan's room to cry. She would stay there for hours on end, lost in her grief.

On a Friday afternoon, just one month and three days after Ethan had passed, she heard a noise that she had not expected to hear so soon. "Have I been in here all day?" she asked herself as she turned her head towards the bright blue clock on the wall next to the closet. But, no, it was only 11:53. "Oh, God, what's happened?" she questioned to herself as she nearly leapt from her place on Ethan's small bed.

Lori ran down the hall, almost knocking over the potted geranium that sat in between the top of the staircase and the large window in the corner, and started down the stairs.

"Hey, Mom," Logan and Hannah had said in unison when they spotted her barreling down the stairs, "What's wrong?"

"Is everything okay? What's happened? Why are you kids

home so early?" The words had flown out of her mouth so fast and jumbled that the children just stood where they were, backpacks still in hand, and stared at their mother.

"Answer me!" Lori shouted as she felt herself become nauseous from grim anticipation.

Logan and Hannah quickly looked at one another, knowing that the other was just as frightened, and then looked back to their mother. "Half day," Hannah said in a small, timid voice.

"Half day?" Lori asked. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I told you and Dad a couple of days ago at the dinner table, don't you remember?" Logan replied.

"No. I guess not," Lori had said back. "How did I not remember that?" she asked silently to herself.

The children, still slightly alarmed, proceeded to put their backpacks down near the hall closet. "Maybe we'll go watch T.V.," Logan said just as much to his mother as to his little sister.

"Yeah, okay. I'll be up in my room if you want me," Lori said as she turned back towards the stairs.

"Go figure," Lori had heard Hannah say as she walked through the house to the family room, her voice trailing off.

Later that evening Nick came home from work at the law office, where he had quickly become partner, as he did normally at about 5:45. After greeting the children and letting them know that he would be ordering pizza for dinner, as had become a ritual since Ethan's death, he asked the pair what they did with their half day.

"Nothin' really. Watched cartoons and then we went out to play for a while with some other kids down the block," Logan said.

"Where's Mom?" Nick asked.

"In her room since we got home," Logan answered with a tone of irritation.

"She ran down and kind of scared us because she thought something was wrong. Then she went back up after we told her we had a half day," Hannah added.

"She's been up there all day?" Nick once again questioned.

"Think so," Hannah said as she moved from her place on the bean bag in front of the T.V. toward the coffee table nearby and picked up a piece of paper. "Wanna see the picture of us that I drew?"

Nick took the picture from Hannah's tiny hands and as he looked at it, he became angry. "Can I show your Mom?"

"Sure, I don't care," she said as she reclaimed her spot on the bean bag chair.

Nick quickly went up stairs and towards the room that he and his wife shared and threw open the door. "Wake up!"

"I'm not sleeping," Lori retorted while still lying on her side, back turned towards Nick.

"Then sit up! Look at this! This is what Hannah thinks of you!" Nick shouted as he threw the drawing at Lori while she was midway into a sitting position.

She picked up the family portrait to find that she was missing from the picture. "Yeah. So?"

"You're not in it! But why would you be? You haven't done a thing since we found out about Ethan!" Nick yelled, turning a deeper shade of red in the face as he continued. "You sit up here and cry and pretend like you're the only one that this happened to! You were always so goddamned holy and you haven't even been to church since the funeral, so I get to be the one to take the kids to catechism and Sunday school, even though you're the one who signed them up!"

"Nick..." Lori whimpered as she sat and quietly cried.

"Shut up! I'm not finished," Nick yelled. "You don't do one damn thing around here anymore! The house is filthy and your family hasn't eaten anything but take out for over a month! You think I'm not sad and upset? Well I am, but I still get up and live everyday because there are two more kids that need me too."

Nick, finally realizing what he had said, sat on the opposite corner of the bed, and put his head in his hands and began to cry.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but I can't help it," was all Lori could muster.

"Maybe we should get you some help. Father McMahon told me about a group of other women like you that meets on Tuesday nights at 7:00. I think you should try it," Nick said as he regained his composure.

"What? No. I'm not going somewhere like that. What good is that going to do for me? I think I know myself better than you! Just leave me alone!" she shouted, the anger in her tone was obvious to Nick.

"If you don't do something, then I'll have to," Nick told her as he stood from the bed and walked toward the bedroom door.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, receiving no answer. A few seconds later she heard his footsteps going down the steps.

"Oh, dear God. What am I doing?" she thought as the tears and sadness became more prevalent. "How did I let this happen to me? Jesus, my poor kids. Do they think that I don't love them anymore?"

She then finally began to realize what she had been doing and made a decision. "That's it, I've gotta get better and act normal," she thought. Surprisingly this simple thought, as quick as it came to her, in some very small way made her feel a bit less glum. Maybe it was because remembered her obligations to her family or maybe it was because Nick had threatened her. Or maybe it was because, deep down, she didn't want to go talk to a bunch of women that couldn't possibly understand what she was going through, or so she thought.

She got up from what had become her daily place on the bed and went to the closet realizing that she hadn't actually been dressed in anything but t-shirts and pajama pants in weeks. Lori picked out one of her favorite shirts, a blue and yellow flowered peasant top, and then turned to the dresser to her rights and opened the bottom drawer with her jeans in it. After putting on the clothes, and coming to the realization that her lack of appetite left her clothing saggy and loose, she quickly moved to the attached master bathroom to brush her hair and attempt to fix the bags under her eyes with concealer. "Well, that's not working too well," she thought and then added some black Lancome mascara to her eyelashes for definition, before finishing with some pink tinted lip gloss.

A short while later, after getting dressed and ready, Lori came down stairs. "So do you guys want to go somewhere for dinner?" she asked sounding somewhat upbeat as she entered the living room where Nick and their children were watching an episode of Garfield.

They all turned their heads towards Lori with a look of surprise on their faces.

"Well, do you?" Lori asked, becoming a little nervous and hoping that she wasn't too late with her gesture.

"We just ordered some pizza," Logan reported. "Are you gonna eat tonight?"

"Yeah, why not?" she said, trying to sound nonchalant, while walking over to the large green couch where her family sat. "Can I sit?"

"Yeah, sit by me Mom," Hannah replied with a happy tone in her voice, while a smile formed across her face.

The evening went as expected, as did the rest of the weekend. Neither Lori nor Nick mentioned what had happened. Lori because she was feeling a good deal of regret, and Nick because he wasn't sure what to say and was wondering how long her happy act would last.

Then on Tuesday afternoon, while she was trying to take inventory of what to buy at the grocery store and simultaneously crying because she remembered that she didn't have to buy as much food nowadays; Lori heard a knock on the door. She quickly grabbed a piece of paper towel and dried her face as she walked toward the front door.

When Lori opened it to find Father McMahon at the door, she was surprised. "Hello, Father," she said as she nervously smoothed her hair into place.

"Hello, Lori," he said to her. "Would you mind if we talked for a minute?"

"Uh, no. Not at all. Come on in," Lori answered as she ushered the priest into the living room. "Excuse the mess, I was feeling a bit under the weather and didn't have much time to clean. Please have a seat. Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"No, thank you. I'm actually on my way to the retirement home to visit with a few of our fellow parishioners, but I wanted to stop and let you know about a group that may help you out a bit. Sorry, I know it's kind of forward of me to say, but you've been coming to church every Sunday for mass for years, and well, you haven't lately," Father McMahon explained.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I just don't think that I'm ready for that yet," Lori responded.

"Well, from what Nick has told me you haven't been doing much of anything lately and he also told me that even though you've seemed a bit better these past few days he's still a little worried," said Father McMahon.

"Well…," Lori had started to try and defend herself before

Father McMahon cut her off.

"Look, all I'm saying that there is a support group for mothers in your situation. I know Nick has told you about it. You should try it out," the aging priest urged.

Lori was still apprehensive, though. "I really appreciate what you're trying to do, but I don't know. Maybe another time?"

"Another time will turn into never, and I really believe that this could help you cope. Please just give it a try? Or at least think about it?" he asked while starting to get up. "I really do have to go but again, just give it a thought. And please come to mass this Sunday. It's just not the same without you there. Okay?"

"Alright Father," she said as they walked toward the door.

After he had left, Lori sat and contemplated the notion of talking about something that she thought only she could understand, and then spotted a card for the "Moms Helping Moms" card. "If anything," she pondered, "those ladies will just make me feel worse." She continued to replay the idea through her mind for the duration of the evening.

Then, at 6:45, she grabbed her purse and car keys, figuring that it might just help, or at least couldn't hurt too much, and yelled to Nick that she'd be back a while later.

Natalie Cosby

The Secret

It was one of those rare fifty degree days in January when I met the girl of my dreams. I was driving to school thinking how awesome it will be when I graduate in May, and blasting an old Tom Petty song on the radio. I pulled into the parking lot, and parked my orange 1976 Camaro far away from the other cars. You know how those eighteen year old drivers can be. They drive like NASCAR drivers with a death wish.

I checked myself in the mirror. I looked pretty good. My dark shoulder length hair was looking perfect and my blue eyes sparkled. I had picked out my favorite pair of Diesel jeans and a new crisp blue shirt (the exact color of my eyes) to wear. Okay who am I kidding? I looked damn hot.

As I got out of my car my buddy Steve met me. "Hey, Johnny, how did it go this weekend?" To which I replied; "It went horribly wrong dude, I almost totaled my car!" Steve had this look of total amazement on his face. He breathed in so hard and fast that he choked on his spit. I let him recover so he could ask me all the questions I knew he wanted to ask.

I will pause here and tell you something I should have right from the start. You see, I am a compulsive liar. I am not happy about it. I just cannot stop myself. In my head the truth is right there ready to be said aloud. I open my mouth and a complete lie pops out, and most the time the lies are outrageous. As people look at me in shock or disbelief I am thinking how the hell did I come up with that? I must have watched a lot of action movies and read a lot of comic books when I was a kid.

Back to Steve: "Dude what happened?" Steve asked me, with a smirk on his face. "Ha, I was just joking stupid!" Well that is what I wanted to say, but I will just tell you that what actually came out was something about a three-legged cat, a man in a Speedo, and jello. I told Steve I would see him later and walked into my class. There she was, the perfect girl. That is when everything in my life changed.

She was pure class. She had long dark hair, big green eyes, and a look of great intelligence about her. All that and she looked as innocent as a bunny rabbit. There was a seat open next to her! I got this weird feeling. I wanted to tell her everything. I had the

irresistible urge to open my heart and say everything that came to mind, but I couldn't. I knew what would happen.

I would say hello and introduce myself. Then she would ask me about myself and of course I would then tell her about climbing the Himalayas in India, or that I interned at the F.B.I. last summer and they liked me so much, they sent me to Russia as an undercover spy, or I would tell her that I could not talk until the time I was twelve, for circumstances that I am not able to talk about.

She smiled at me and said; "Would you like to sit here?" I took only thirty more seconds to think about it, and then sat down next to the woman I knew I would marry and have many children and grandchildren with. She looked at me right in the eyes after I sat down, and I swear I lost my voice, my thoughts, my whole identity right in that moment.

She said "My name is Paige, what is your name?" I opened my mouth, and the only thing that came out was j j j. My breath caught, my world swam, and I saw stars. No that is understating it; I saw galaxies, planets, stars being born! She waited patiently and smiled sweetly at me, like I could take all the time in the world to answer her, and she would. I finally got the words out, just four words. "My name is Johnny". She held out her hand in a formal gesture only a girl with such class and grace would do. I took it, and I found home.

She asked me if I had this teacher before. I just shook my head because I did not trust my voice, or what would come out of my mouth for that matter. She complimented my shirt and said it was the perfect color on me, and that it must have been made special because it matched my eyes so well. I think that was the first time I have blushed since I was in elementary school and had gotten caught singing in the mirror to a George Michael song, but that is another story. I wanted to compliment her too. I wanted to tell her she was the most beautiful person I had ever seen, I wanted to tell her I loved her, hell I wanted to ask her to marry me, but all I ended up doing was blushing and smiling. Score one for me on being cool and confident with the female species.

I kept repeating this mantra in my head "Dude, keep it short and simple". So we started to have THE most amazing conversation I have ever had in my entire life. I was so enthralled by what she was saying, and how she was saying it, I did not think. I could

not think. I realized I had not told one single lie. It was not just that, but I knew that I could never lie to this girl ever. It was one of those moments in life; you know the ones I am talking about. The moment when everything is perfect, and you are completely in the present. I imagine that is how people who are enlightened feel all the time. Like the yogis that live in the Himalayas in India. No, I really did not climb them, but I do know some facts about the country so, give me a little credit.

Then all the sudden I heard my name being shouted by a guy walking into class. He looked really familiar, but I could not place his face. "Hey John-o how ya been, long time no see!" Of course no one ever called me John-o, not only does it sound dumb, but it does not even rhyme. I remembered this guy; he was in a class of mine last year. I really did not like him back then, but when he walked into that class and interrupted a conversation between my future wife and me, I wanted to pick up my desk, break one of the legs off and beat him to death with it. I am definitely not kidding.

"John-o it's really great to see you dude, I'm psyched you are in another class with me, you have the best stories!" Oh crap, I began wishing; wishing with every fiber of my being that suddenly his lips would fall off and he would freak out and run to the hospital emergency room. I prayed to God that he would suddenly come down with a case of amnesia, and he would ask me what his name was, and where he was. The next thing out of his mouth was definitely not a question about the origin of his birth, it was a series of questions about all the stories I had told him the previous year.

I just listened in horror, my heart sinking, and skin turning grey. It was like watching a scary movie in slow motion, only the scary movie is about your life, and the fast forward does not work. "Dude, John, whatever happened with that chicken farm?" "Did you have to go there and fix all the stuff you ruined in the....." that is when I cut it off. I told him I had to hit the head, and that I would talk to him later. I grabbed the bathroom pass and tried really hard to walk normally to the door, but what I really wanted to do was run, actually I wanted to throw myself out of the classroom. I wanted to dig a very large hole, crawl into it and stay there for the rest of my life. All my dreams and hopes that I had just built up with Paige had crashed and burned, just like the chicken farm when I.... (That is also another story for another time).

I rinsed my face with some cold water, and checked my watch. I had been in the bathroom for five minutes, and I had to get back to class. Unfortunately I had left all of my stuff in the seat next to my used-to-be future wife. The teacher was speaking as I went in, which was a good thing because I did not want Paige to yell at me and call me a jerk. I walked over to the seat with my head hanging low. How could this happen to me? Not only did I meet my soul mate, but I did not tell one lie to her the entire time. Those two things I would never have dreamed of and I certainly did not know that this would happen when I woke up this morning.

I went to pick up my stuff to move another seat, and then I felt an electric jolt course through my body. A pleasant one of course, not like being hit by lightening on a golf course, and I looked down. Paige had grabbed my arm. I looked at her kind face, and she smiled at me, that lovely smile. She said "Don't worry, I know". "Sit down Johnny." That changed me forever, and my life was never the same without Paige in it. You should believe that, it's not like I'm a compulsive liar or anything, right?

Well I am a compulsive liar, but this time I'm telling the truth. The magic, fireworks, love everything! Too bad that never lasts. Let me tell you the rest of the story. Paige and I were inseparable from that point on, which is only really a few months. We graduated, and started the summer together. We went to the beach, the movies, and parties. Everyone noticed the change in me, and I couldn't wait to introduce all my friends to the new love of my life. I did that at my best friend's graduation party. There were several kegs, and the beer was flowing! Everyone was so happy to have completed that point in their lives. I walked in, and again things changed. I walked into Steve's house and was immediately tackled by him. I could tell he was already drunk. "Steve CALM DOWN!" I shouted at him. "Be normal" Of course he only answered with chugging the rest of his beer and belching. I looked at Paige with an apology in my eyes. She just smiled because Paige just understood me in a way no one else ever had.

"Steve, this is my girlfriend Paige" I said. "It's nice to meet the girl that stole my buddy away" he said "Naw, I'm just kidding with ya" "Have a drink." We walked over to the keg to fill our red plastic solo cups with icy cold beer. All of our friends were there and they came over to meet the famous Paige.

Again, I'm going to stop now and fill you in a little bit

about what's been going on. My friends were happy for me and everything, but they were a little sore about me not spending any time with them lately. I think they thought I was lying. (Big surprise). That I just did not want to hang with them since we had graduated. So you can imagine my lack of enthusiasm when introducing Paige. I wasn't sure if they would just be mean to her, or that they would accept her.

"Hey Paige, it's nice to finally meet you" all of them said. "It's really nice to meet you too, I heard so much about you from Johnny" she replied. "So tell us all how you guys met, and I want to hear every detail" Carrie stated. Carrie was Steve's girlfriend, one of the nicest girls you could ever meet. So I started to tell the story, but after a few minutes, Paige interrupted. "Well Johnny, that isn't exactly how it happened sweetie" Paige said matter of fact.

Okay, so maybe she wanted to tell the version in her own way. That was fine; girls love to tell this kind of stuff. They always add in better details anyway. Well sometimes its better, and sometimes they just draw out a whole damn story with way too many details that by the end of the story, you forget what they are talking about. Anyway I try to focus and listen to Paige's version of the story. "Well Johnny, looked just scared, and confused like he didn't know what on earth was going on or where he was" Paige was saying. Wait a second, okay maybe I was a little scared, but come on she made it sound like I came into the classroom like I had just been released from the hospital after a bad car accident, oh and had amnesia.

"I could tell that he didn't talk to girls very often and that he really didn't have any motivations or goals" Paige continued. WHAT?! What was she talking about? Motivations, goals? Huh? "I also new that he needed help, and that there was a problem, I just didn't know that it was lying at first" Paige unfortunately continued on. Now I'm having a real problem. My friends are all looking at me like who the hell is this girl? Why is she talking about you like that? I couldn't even make eye contact with them. I then knew what was happening.

She was one-upping me again. Yeah she had done it several times before, but I just wrote it off because it was no big deal. At the movies I would tell her that I read the book that the movie was made from. She would then say she went to an author's sign-

ing of the book, and had a lengthy conversation with him over coffee. Or another time, when we were at the beach I had said that I'm a pretty decent swimmer, and she replied that she had done one of those triathlons and came in first place in her home town. Ooookay, again love is blind, so I would just smile and nod.

This, this was something else though. She was on-upping me in front of my friends, and not even in just a normal way. She was talking down about me, she made me seem like I was some kind of project to be taken care of. Maybe she could put it on her College applications. I don't know. I sure didn't want to stand for it though. So after she got finished telling her lame story, about how much of a failure I was before her, I took her to the side and dumped her butt. I don't want to be mean, and tell you exact details, but let's just say it had something to do with a swing, a puppet, and soup. And that is the story about how my life changed twice in two moments.

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Spring 2007